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Putin Tries to Block VOA and Other Foreign Broadcasts from Russian Audiences ^[1]

It's back to Cold War days at the Voice of America. The Russian government is still trying to block VOA programs from entering the country, but not succeeding totally.


During the Cold War, a Soviet Union "jammer" would transmit static over the radio frequency of a foreign news broadcast aimed for audiences behind the Iron Curtain to render the radio signal inaudible. Broadcast interference is much more sophisticated as practiced in today's Russia, and the VOA and other international programmers are once again being put to the test.

Three years ago Russian President Vladimir Putin began his media clampdown, starting with his purge of independent media in his own country. NTV, Russia's only non-government TV channel, was seized, and turned into a state-run sports channel.

Putin also disposed of other independent media not to his liking, including a radio network, a newspaper and a weekly magazine.

David Jackson, director of the Voice of America, told Worldcasting that all international media have suffered equally in their attempts to reach Russian audiences. The primary reason is political, he says, because the Russian government controls the media. Jackson says that as a result, it's "a difficult environment for international broadcasters to work with local stations throughout Russia," to get them to carry VOA news and public affairs programs, and those of other international broadcasters.

Jackson also said that the government has made advertising rates very costly for those broadcasting into Russia, to make it more difficult for international broadcasters to attract new viewers and listeners. "Foreign broadcasters are being discouraged in lots of ways," he said.

According to the Russian government's news agency, RIA Novosti, known formerly as the Soviet Information Bureau during the Cold War, audience levels of government broadcasts from the U.S. and Britain are in "catastrophic" decline in Russia. Political Commentator Vasily Kononenko reported on "a recent public opinion poll showing that foreign radio voices broadcasting to Russia have lost most of their audiences." The poll  was taken in June by the Eurasian media and marketing research firm Comcon-2.

The U.S. government's Radio Liberty "is the only one keeping afloat," reports Kononenko. "It is 28th on the list of popular radio stations in Moscow (1.2 percent of the audience). The other radio stations are quickly approaching zero: The BBC Russian Service is only 33rd (0.5

percent) and the Voice of America, 36th (0.4 percent)."


VOA director David Jackson points out that the poll was restricted to listeners in Moscow, leaving out inroads the VOA has made by getting carriage on regional outlets, despite pressures on them from politicians to exclude the VOA. He said such a survey would be like taking a U.S. poll only in New York, leaving out the rest of the country.

RIA Novosti's Kononenko says one reason for the falloff in Western audience levels is "harsh competition from the Russian media," which broadcast on the popular FM and VHS bands, not on the medium band frequencies that foreign broadcasters use. But more important, says Kononenko, "Russia is fighting terrorism now, and the audiences here are offended by the choice of words by Western radio stations and their allegedly neutral attitude to crimes of terrorism." In particular, he said some broadcasts "described the terrorists who took hostage children and adults in a Beslan school in September 2004 as 'rebels.' The radio stations have ceased to be objective sources of information." Kononenko apparently was referring to BBC news broadcasts, which do not use the word "terrorists."

The European Broadcasting Union's Morand Fachot told Worldcasting that he doubted "there will be any cut in the BBC's Russian service soon. Russia is seen as a major country and given the state of the media there, it's likely to remain a priority. Further, the BBC relies on its own audience surveys, and recent figures covering eight major Russian cities indicate higher audiences than that given by the RAI/Novosti commentator."

David Jackson says the climate in Putin's Russia has caused the VOA to "become very aggressive" to become a bigger player in the media market there, citing as an example a major plan to expand its radio and TV reach outside Moscow. Despite obstacles, the VOA has placed its programs on more than 80 TV stations in Russia. And in April, the VOA launched a daily half-hour TV news program, "Focus."

Thus far, Putin has not pulled the plug on any VOA programs, as such censorship would surely cause an uproar in Washington and around the world, although several VOA broadcasts have skirted the edge, such as a VOA call-in show about jailed Russian tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, which included his attorneys.

Former Deputy Director of the VOA Alan Heil cites a report by InterMedia Survey Inc. of Washington, D.C., which states that "VOA television is competitive in each of the five markets in Russia measured in 2004, including Moscow and St. Petersburg." On the radio side, Heil said some of the VOA's Russian call-in programs are transcribed and transmitted on the VOA's Eurasian website .

Aside from the political climate inside Russia, international broadcasters face additional competition from satellite and cable TV, especially in Moscow where attractive packages of commercial TV programs are available to subscribers, which include the Discovery and National Geographic channels, CNN, Fox Kids, CNBC, and Turner Classic Movies, among many other choices.

While VOA radio listening levels in Russia may not be at Cold War highs, its multimedia service is finding its way.
